



# Positioning Southwest Airlines through employee branding

Sandra Jeanquart Miles\*, W. Glynn Mangold

*Department of Management, Marketing, and Business Administration,  
College of Business and Public Affairs, Murray State University, Murray, KY 42071, USA*

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**Abstract** As the field of employee branding has begun to unfold, more and more executives have become interested in how this process can help them achieve a competitive advantage for their organizations. This article explains how employee branding works and how it can be utilized to position the organization in the minds of customers, employees, and other stakeholders. A contextual analysis of its use as a source of sustainable competitive advantage at Southwest Airlines is presented. Finally, key success factors are identified for those who wish to make employee branding a strategic focus within their organizations.

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## 1. Employee branding and Southwest Airlines: A winning combination

Employee branding as a source of strategic competitive advantage has been a basis for discussion in recent years. While practitioners focused on the importance of employee branding and its positive outcomes, their discourse often lacked focus because they did not agree on the term's definition or its conceptualization. Clarity was added when our 2004 *Journal of Relationship Marketing* article (Miles & Mangold, 2004) defined employee branding as “the process by which employees internalize the

desired brand image and are motivated to project the image to customers and other organizational constituents” (p. 68). The conceptualization presented along with this definition provided insight into how organizations could achieve a competitive advantage by strategically utilizing the employee branding process.

In this work, we extend our previous conceptualization by presenting a contextual analysis of Southwest Airlines' use of the employee branding process to gain an organizational “position” in the minds of customers. Our extension also acknowledges the key role the organization's mission and values play in the employee branding process, and recognizes that employees must have knowledge of the desired brand image if they are to project that image to others. This analysis will lead to a better understanding of the use of employee branding as a

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [sandy.miles@murraystate.edu](mailto:sandy.miles@murraystate.edu) (S.J. Miles), [glynn.mangold@murraystate.edu](mailto:glynn.mangold@murraystate.edu) (W.G. Mangold).

positioning tool, and will clarify the manner in which the employee branding process can be used as a source of competitive advantage.

In the United States, Southwest Airlines has, by most measures, been the most successful airline in its industry. This success is largely due to the competitive advantage Southwest has gained by effectively positioning the organization in customers' minds. Its organizational position has mainly been achieved through its human resource practices, most of which fall under the rubric of employee branding. The receipt of the 2003 Kozmetsky Award for Branding Excellence and the 2004 Performance Through People Award provides evidence of the effectiveness of Southwest's positioning and employee branding strategies. Other notable achievements and recognitions of Southwest's success are outlined in Table 1.

In a personal interview with the authors, Colleen Barrett, President and Chief Operating Officer, attributed Southwest's success to its employees. From a conceptual perspective, however, it may be more accurate to say that Southwest's success appears to be largely founded on a complex process by which the company motivates employees to internalize and deliver the desired brand image. This motivational process is principally rooted in the concept of employee branding. The outcome is readily observed by those who come into contact with Southwest employees, and contributes heavily to the position Southwest holds in customers' minds. As such, Southwest appears to be an appropriate

benchmark for organizations in which managerial attention is focused on the use of employee branding to gain a competitive advantage.

## 2. The employee branding process

The employee branding process enables the organization to consistently deliver its desired brand image to customers, thereby solidifying a clear position in the minds of customers and employees alike. When done well, it provides a competitive advantage that is achieved through employees, who have internalized the desired brand image and are motivated to project that image to customers and other organizational constituents.

The employee branding process is represented in Fig. 1. As the model indicates, the organization's mission and values are the cornerstones of the process: they state the organization's reason for being and give insight into the manner in which the mission is to be accomplished. An organization's mission and values provide a foundation by which the desired brand image is defined.

Messages transmitted within the organization should clearly convey the organization's mission, values, and desired brand image. They should also communicate the behaviors and attitudes the organization deems important and expects from employees. Perhaps most importantly, the messages must be proactively designed, and delivered frequently and consistently through all message

**Table 1** Southwest Airlines accomplishments

Year	Award	Sponsor
2004	Top Performing Companies	Aviation Week and Space Technology
2004	Performance Through People	The Forum for People Performance and Measurement (2005)
2003	America's Top Ten Admired Companies	Fortune
2003	Airline of the Year	Air Transport Magazine
2003	Corporate Conscience Award for Community Positive Impact	Social Accountability International
2003	Brand Keys Customer Loyalty Award	Brandweek
2003	Most Pleasant Airline	Babycenter.com
2003	Best Domestic Airline of the Year	Travel Weekly
2003	World's Most Socially Responsible Companies	Global Finance Magazine
2003	Employer of Choice Among College Students	Fortune
2002–2003	100 Best Corporate Citizens	Business Ethics Magazine
2002–2003	Best Reputation among U.S. airlines	Harris Interactive Inc. and the Reputation Institute
2002–2003	Airline of the Year	Air Couriers Conference of America
2002–2003	Top 20 Companies for Leaders	Chief Executive Magazine
2001–2004	The 50 Most Desirable MBA Employers	Fortune
2001–2003	Best Low Cost Airline	Official Airline Guide
2000–2003	Hispanic Corporate 100	HISPANIC Magazine
1997–2003	Most Admired Airline in the World	Fortune
1972–2002	Best Performing Stock over the Thirty-year period from 1972–2002	Money Magazine

Source: Southwest Airlines fact sheet <<http://www.swamedia.com/swamedia/factsheet.html#Recognitions>> (Southwest Airlines, 2004).

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